# Not as It Is Written

## Blending Oral Histories and Historic Photographs in a Civil Rights Exhibition

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**ABSTRACT:** This article discusses an international exhibition that detailed the recent history of African Americans in Pittsburgh. Methodologically, the exhibition paired oral history excerpts with selected historic photographs to evoke a sense of Black life during the twentieth century. Thematically, showcasing the Black experience in Pittsburgh provided a chance to provoke among a wider public more nuanced understandings of the civil rights movement, an era particularly prone to problematic and superficial misreadings, but also to interject an African American perspective into the scholarship on deindustrializing cities, a literature which treats racism mostly in white-centric terms. This essay focuses on the choices made in reconciling these thematic and methodological dimensions when designing this exhibition.

**KEY WORDS:** oral history, photography, African Americans, civil rights, Pittsburgh, deindustrialization

In 2017, I curated an international exhibition featuring the modern history of African Americans in Pittsburgh entitled "*Not As It Is Written": Black Pittsburgh in Voice and Image* that ran simultaneously in Pittsburgh and Newcastle upon Tyne, England. The show paired historic images, taken by Charles "Teenie" Harris, an African American photographer whose archive remains in the city, with selections from a recent oral history project documenting Black Pittsburgh. Set against the backdrop of civil rights event anniversaries, plus a new era of contemporary Black activism, the exhibition presented a case study of race relations in one city. The overarching intent was to complicate the so-called "master narrative" of the civil rights movement, the term for trite and problematic popular understandings of the Black freedom struggle.[1]

1 Brian Ward, ed., *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 8; Julian Bond, as quoted in Charles Payne, "The View from the Trenches," in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1968*, ed. Steven F. Lawson and Charles M. Payne (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998), 108–9.

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In its worst forms, the distortions and misplaced emphases inherent in the master narrative create not only poor historical awareness but also obstacles for grasping present-day racial struggles. By suggesting erroneously that the Black freedom struggle was neatly and firmly bounded in time, space, and results, pernicious (mis)understandings are perpetuated. The idea that the civil rights movement only occurred between the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination is one example. So too, is the presumption that the movement only happened in the South and was led wholly by Dr. King. It also assumes that the movement eventually won over the federal government and white people in general who came to see the errors of their segregated ways. The result is a false narrative arc where the triumphs of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts succumbed to the angry lawlessness and radicalism associated with Black Power activists and ghetto rioters.

These persistent false notions about the civil rights movement among the general white populace are a source of consternation for scholars and public historians alike. Hence the exhibition's title, derived from an oral history with a long-time Black resident of Pittsburgh. His assertion was that African American stories, properly understood, constitute an alternate history to what most white people think they know. Using that notion as a polestar, this exhibition tried to present that alternative history via a combination of visual and aural materials. In direct and indirect ways, the combination provided a sense of place but also a number of countervailing notions about "civil rights," using the example of a nonsouthern city, photographs from the era, and direct testimony from those who lived this history. Shifting focus away from southern-style Jim Crow towards patterns of segregation in a Rust Belt city also added an opportunity to introduce ideas about African American experiences of deindustrialization. Race remains mostly ignored in this historical literature, discussed only in general terms, in relation to identity among working-class whites, or in the context of the overall post-industrial resegregation of Rust Belt cities, instead of a consideration of what shifting economic contexts meant for African Americans specifically and how civil rights activism had to evolve accordingly. As such, by fusing visual and oral representations of civil rights activism I hoped to, first, thematically introduce more sophisticated renderings of the Black freedom struggle and, secondly, methodologically explore the possibilities of mixing oral narratives and photographic depictions to represent the past.

## Background

From 2006 to 2009, the author coordinated a team of scholars working for the Center for Africanamerican Urban Studies and the Economy (henceforth CAUSE), based at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. This initiative, the Remembering African American Pittsburgh (henceforth RAP) project, recorded nearly two hundred oral histories in digital audio with Black Pittsburghers. This archive augmented the publication of *Race and Renaissance: African Americans in Pittsburgh*

*Since World War II*, by Joe William Trotter Jr. and Jared N. Day, a comprehensive synthesis of the scholarship documenting recent Black history in Pittsburgh.[2] RAP included graduate training in semester-long seminars, where students were immersed in the theory and methodology of oral history and did interviews as part of their coursework. Summer workshops introduced key dimensions of Pittsburgh's Black history and generated a loose template of themes and questions that interviewers could use or depart from as they wished. Additional interviews were recorded during the summer months by those who had successfully completed the class and workshop. Students from an advanced undergraduate seminar, plus an assorted team of adjunct scholars and community supporters, generated additional clusters of interviews.

The major objective was to explore African American agency in the era of deindustrialization and to facilitate Black voices being interjected into scholarly understandings of this topic. Deindustrialization, with its multidimensional role in shaping the society, economics, and politics of today, is now rightly the focus of substantial attention. Within those robust scholarly conversations are particularly rich veins of literature focusing on the oral histories and memories of those who experienced this era first-hand, plus those who photograph the remnants of deindustrialized spaces and places.

However, despite this thriving body of scholarship, there is a conspicuous lack of consideration about African American experiences of deindustrialization. Indeed, the literature as a whole engages with racial matters in terms of whiteness only. (An emphatic exception is the work of lauded African American photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier, from Braddock, a mill town outside of Pittsburgh, whose work documents the racial, economic, and health issues consuming her family and community in stark and vividly personal terms.) Briefly put, just as the civil rights movement's achievements were growing, the ground underneath was swept away during the 1970s, when large-scale job loss and factory closures ravaged the Pittsburgh area and altered the political and economic context for civil rights change. That altered context necessarily also changed the contours of Black struggle.

But past and present are also connected in this literature, a particular issue for public historians. Many scholars discuss how both gentrification and the heritage industry have particular, and some would argue problematic, roles in how this industrial history is now preserved and remembered. Thus we have the derisory notion of "smokestack nostalgia," in which renewed communities keep only enough historical flavor to be deemed authentic while catering to white upper-class lifestyles. A similar critique is implied in "ruin porn," the term describing the abundant photographic literature documenting the decaying landscapes of the

2 Joe W. Trotter and Jared N. Day, *Race and Renaissance: African Americans in Pittsburgh since World War II* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010). Trotter is director of CAUSE and Day was an interviewer for RAP.

crumbling industrial order—what oral historian Steven High calls sardonically the "deindustrial sublime."[3] His caustic terminology responds to how present-day repurposing of former industrial sites conspire, whether directly or obliquely, to silence the suffering and human toll of wrecked workers, families, and communities left in deindustrialization's wake.[4] These issues have racial subtexts at their heart. A core interpretative issue of deindustrialization, then, is how to do justice to these devastating changes and honor the real-life impact that accompanied them. But that impulse also risks caricaturing the individuals who underwent these experiences and removing them from a longer sweep of history. Adding an African American perspective to overturn overly facile narratives promises to help us reorient stock understandings of the Black freedom struggle and the forces of deindustrialization writ large.

## The Occasion

As RAP's interviewing phase concluded and the work of transcribing commenced, I took a job at Newcastle University, in Newcastle upon Tyne in northeastern England. Newcastle is not unlike Pittsburgh, a city of former industrial might (shipbuilding and coal-related industries, in the case of the former, steel in the latter) still struggling with the ravages of deindustrialization but endeavoring to reinvent itself. That reinvention parallels Pittsburgh's; both cities emphasize their new economic strengths predicated on "eds and meds" (the education and health-care sectors) and technology. Stirringly, however, Newcastle has historic connections with civil rights struggles in America, with two examples foremost: 1) a prominent Quaker abolitionist family in the city, strong allies of Frederick Douglass, provided the money which bought his freedom in 1846, and 2) on November 13, 1967, Newcastle University gave Martin Luther King Jr. an honorary doctorate in recognition of his social justice work—the only UK university to do so in his lifetime. Both these examples gesture towards a complicated history that, while not absolving Newcastle or the UK for their own histories of diverse forms of racism, nonetheless indicate some of the transnational sinews strengthening the global Black freedom struggle.[5]

As such, Newcastle University coordinated a city-wide festival, Freedom City 2017, that mingled academic, cultural, and public programming in commemorating

3 Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott, eds., *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrilization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003); Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

4 Tim Strangleman, "'Smokestack Nostalgia,' 'Ruin Porn' or Working-Class Obituary: The Role and Meaning of Deindustrial Representation," *International Labor and Working-Class History,* 84, no. 1 (December 2013): 23–37; Cowie and Heathcott, *Beyond the Ruins,* 15; High and Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland*, 8.

5 Brian Ward, *Martin Luther King in Newcastle Upon Tyne: The African American Freedom Struggle and Race Relations in the North East of England* (Newcastle: Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2017).


Charles "Teenie" Harris, "Elderly woman holding Pittsburgh Courier newspaper with headline reading 'Reverend King Freed: Albany Tense' seated in armchair, July 1962." (Courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

MLK's visit to the city. The festival's organizers hoped to spur city-wide reflection about the speech King gave during his quick visit, in which he highlighted the interrelated issues of war, poverty, and racism. Although these themes and a radical critique of American society had always been present in his thinking, King's Newcastle trip correlated to a moment when he was increasingly outspoken about the relationship between these issues. That historical background meant that Freedom City 2017 provided an opportunity, using RAP's interviews, to present a more calibrated example of race relations in modern America. A local venue, the Great

North Museum: Hancock (henceforth GNM:H), agreed to stage the show. Known primarily as a natural history museum, GNM:H was embarking on efforts to diversify its programming by adding cultural and artistic events, which the Pittsburgh exhibition aided. Internal funding from university institutes, plus a grant from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council, defrayed design and logistical costs. The exhibition was complemented by an original film called *FREEDOM* by Newcastle academic and filmmaker Ian McDonald. *FREEDOM* spanned four screens and jumped between archival protest footage from the US and UK while also including contemporary visuals and interviews with current American activists and protestors. The effect reflected on MLK's Newcastle speech and connected it firmly to recent history. Pairing it with the Pittsburgh display made for a useful contrast: the immersive look into African American life in one city from a historical perspective as a case-study complemented the film's broader transnational focus and considered attempt to be a provocation for the present.

In staging this exhibition and thinking about how best to engage the Newcastle public with the oral histories and introduce Black Pittsburgh's history to a wider audience, I decided to partner with the Carnegie Museum of Art (henceforth CMOA) in Pittsburgh. CMOA serves as the repository for the Charles "Teenie" Harris photographic collection which numbers over 80,000 images. Combining his work as a freelancer working in the city for decades and his beat for the famed Black newspaper the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Harris's corpus remains one of the world's finest Black photographic archives. Much of his work focused on the Hill District, the epicenter for Black life in the city. He mixed photographs of the quotidian and the grand, from famed jazz artists performing in the city to everyday street shots, with Black civic institutions and organizations also prominently featured. Teenie had a more modernist aesthetic than his contemporaries James VanDerZee in Harlem and the Scurlock Brothers in Washington, DC. He preferred more intimate, less posed photographic subjects that tried to capture personality and feeling, whether he was photographing individuals or community life. He also understood his important vantage point in documenting Pittsburgh's changing Black neighborhoods, even as he skewed towards tending to cover Pittsburgh's Black middle class. Pairing his images with the oral narratives, I hoped, would highlight the different feels and textures of this history to create a fuller spectrum of intellectual and emotional responses to the themes and content. Subsequently, the CMOA decided to replicate the exhibition in its gallery devoted to rotating Teenie-centered shows, although it was not accompanied by the *FREEDOM* film. Although the Harris archive remains treasured by Pittsburgh's Black community, the CMOA mostly caters to white middle-class and elite visitors, which in many ways minimized the differences between the two venues' audiences, despite being in different countries.[6]

6 The Pittsburgh version of the exhibition differed only in the selection of four alternative photographs, replacing ones that had been previously employed by Harris exhibitions in the museum, and it had a different layout along both sides of a long corridor. The text and everything else was identical except for an additional panel explaining Newcastle and Freedom City 2017's

It should also be noted that American history in general, but perhaps especially classes on the civil rights movement, are extremely popular with university students in the United Kingdom. This comes with some lamentable downsides: pre-university teaching that also skews towards reinforcing the "master narrative," and/or an overly specific focus on American racial history rather than race in a global or even British context. Yet a real passion for the subject exists. Accordingly this exhibition constituted an opportunity to feature stories about civil rights for students and the Newcastle public, accounts that would not conform to the usual name- and place-understanding of this era but could evoke a historical sensibility of change over time. It also provided an opportunity to at least hint at issues in the scholarly literature pertaining to overlapping issues at stake: the use of oral histories to document deindustrialization, the works of African American photographers as social documentary, and the chance to move towards an understanding of the African American transition into a postindustrial world.[7]

## The Hill District

Locating the Pittsburgh story mostly but not exclusively in the Hill District grounded the exhibition narrative, although that was not without its issues. The Hill is a prime example of how a given place, as oral historian Shelly Trower suggests, should be seen as evolving and in flux rather than static and frozen in time.[8] Although correctly understood as the heart of Pittsburgh's African American community, that understanding also downplays the evolution of other Black communities within the city and distorts the dynamics of the Hill District internally as well. The exhibition did not have the necessary space to investigate this theme in detail, but it did try to capture more of that change over time and demonstrate how the Hill District's decline was part of a larger racial story. After being settled in the 1820s by white and Black elites, the Hill witnessed waves of demographic change encompassing people of Irish, German, Jewish Eastern European, African American, Middle Eastern, and Chinese descent. By the Depression era, African Americans were demographically predominant in the neighborhood but ethnic enclaves made for a vibrant, multiracial area. Moreover, the Hill District noticeably encoded some class patterns within its landscape: the elite lived in "Sugar Top" at the very apex, while transient laborers clustered in the boardinghouses of the

impetus behind the exhibition's design. The best introduction to Teenie Harris is Cheryl Finley, Laurence Glasco, and Joe W. Trotter, *Teenie Harris, Photographer: Image, Memory, History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press and Carnegie Museum of Art, 2011). A full bibliography is maintained at: http://teenie.cmoa.org/about.aspx?id=4790 and Teenie's full image archive, searchable by date or keyword, is at: http://teenie.cmoa.org/Default.aspx.

7 Megan Hunt, Nick Megoran, Benjamin Houston, and Brian Ward, "'He Was Shot Because America Will Not Give Up on Racism': Martin Luther King, Jr. and the African American Civil Rights Movement in British Schools," article in progress.

8 Shelly Trower, ed., *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 13.

Lower Hill. Additionally, the neighborhood's cultural institutions were spread throughout the entire Hill District, thus serving audiences that were mixed-race and mixed-class. Historian Laura Grantmyre noted that "Although class tensions separated the Hill into multiple, separate, and distinctive Black communities, geographic and cultural overlaps knitted these multiple Hills together." The area was culturally rich, with a jazz scene rivalling many bigger cities, and a range of shops, businesses, and institutions served a wide clientele.[9]

All this changed beginning in the 1950s, when the decision to bulldoze a section of the lower Hill and build a civic arena devastated the area. This urban renewal not only changed the composition of the neighborhood, but it relocated hundreds of people in geographic terms, and often in economic ones too, by placing them in public housing. The result reshaped the Black community. It scattered them into other neighborhoods throughout the city which inhibited political empowerment and collective action. It triggered widespread and often effective activist protest, but protest that was necessarily defensive and reactive in posture rather than proactive. And it augured complications for the local Black freedom struggle that, despite its victories, found itself working against even more difficult conditions as the full weight of the economic collapse dropped on Pittsburgh precisely at the same time that the civil rights movement was gaining some traction throughout the city.

## Speaking to Scholarly Conversations

As such, remembering the Hill's evolution must be rooted in a complex array of historical realities and processes. It is important not only to celebrate the cultural vibrancy of the Hill in its heyday but to memorialize the absence and loss of what it was, analyze why that absence came about, and understand what that means for people today. In this sense, the Hill District example offers the chance to tell these stories in human terms particularly if not only through the narratives detailing the trauma and ruptures of urban renewal. But it is intellectually important, too, as a means of tracing how deindustrialization happened—not just as the inevitable pangs of a dying industrial order but the result, as Pittsburgh's best historians stress, of conscious choices made to embrace the postindustrial order with scant regard for those most affected by the change. In that sense, the Hill powerfully exemplifies the destructive side of urban renewal, of city elites looking towards urban demolition as a form of suburban rebirth elsewhere—no matter the cost to marginalized communities within the city.[10] Thus, in my exhibition, deindustrialization remains

9 Mark Whitaker, *Smoketown: The Untold Story of the Other Great Black Renaissance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018); Laurence Glasco, "Double Burden: History of Blacks in Pittsburgh," in *City at the Point,* ed. S. P. Hays (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 69–110; Laura Grantmyre, "They Lived Their Life and They Didn't Bother Anybody: African American Female Impersonators and Pittsburgh's Hill District, 1920–1960," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 4 (December 2011): 988, 991.

10 Kaeleigh Herstad, "'Reclaiming' Detroit: Demolition and Deconstruction in the Motor City," *The Public Historian* 39, no. 4 (November 2017): 112.

in the background behind the more prevalent circumstances of urban renewal. The resultant resettling of African Americans physically and economically into more straitened circumstances takes a more prominent role.[11]

If the African American experience of deindustrialization is missing in the scholarly literature, the same is not true of the exploding popular and academic interest in Black photography.[12] African American photographic archives permit powerful opportunities, if used carefully, for public historians. These photographers over time pursued careers and crafts devoted to faithfully representing the complex inner lives of their communities. But they also self-consciously meant to portray African Americans with virtues of respectability, success, self-worth, and more in a society that denied them those characteristics. Their work is receiving increasing attention in recent scholarship, first by the pioneering Deborah Willis, and now from many particularly focused on civil rights era photography, Mark Speltz and Martin Berger most prominently. Leigh Raiford's work is also central to this effort with her assertion that Black photography served as a "technology of memory" for African Americans. She explores how Black photographers deployed their medium, not only as a way of pushing back against racist portrayals of African Americans, but also to evoke new aesthetics that reconceptualized Black identity on Black terms. By using the image as a "site of memory," Raiford posits that photography nurtures a "critical black memory" functioning as an "ongoing, engaged practice through which a range of participants speak back to history and assess ongoing crises faced by Black subjects." She emphasizes how this very much "implies the negotiation, the use, of history for the present." In this way, the opportunity for my exhibition squared directly with the call from Lonnie Bunch, head of the Smithsonian Institution and previously founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, for public history that "re-centers" Black history within American history. Bunch asserted that such exhibits benefit from embracing "ambiguity" while simultaneously "transcending the rosy glow" and "resisting monolithic depictions" of the past.[13]

11 Allen Dieterich-Ward, *Beyond Rust: Metropolitan Pittsburgh and the Fate of Industrial America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Tracy Neumann, *Remaking the Rust Belt: The Postindustrial Transformation of North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, And What We Can Do About It* (New York: New Village Press, 2016); Herstad, "Reclaiming Detroit," 112; Francesca Ammon, *Bulldozer: Demolition and Clearance in the Postwar Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

12 See the issue "Vision and Justice," *Aperture: The Magazine of Photography and Ideas* 223 (Summer 2016), edited by Sarah Lewis, especially her guest editor's note at https://aperture.org/blog/vision-justice/; Sandra Stevenson, "Seeing Black Culture With a Careful Eye," *New York Times* Race/Related column, June 28, 2016; Candice Frederick, "Black Aesthetics in the Digital Collections: Thoughts on Black Portraiture," July 21, 2016, New York Public Library blog, https://www.nypl.org/blog/2016/07/21/black-aesthetics-portraiture.

13 Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* (New York: W.W. Norton 2000; reprint edition, 2002); Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, eds., *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Leigh Raiford, "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black

Additional insight came from Bill Schwarz's useful thoughtpiece on civil rights photography, which describes how images from the era can both transport a viewer to the past and also provide a critical distance opening up space for historical reflection. He rightly distinguishes the images that depict pinpoint dramas now seared into popular consciousness from those capturing the quotidian qualities of segregation. This is particularly important for those motivated to push against the master narrative associated with the Black freedom struggle, which in many ways originated in the media coverage of the time. He also cautions that, even as these images evoke the reality around the photo and invite the viewer to contemplate it, they also risk losing the context of struggle and historical evolution that lurks around the image. He suggests that the sequencing of the photos—the creation of a visual narrative—can help spur a more robust critical reflection, an important point that I will return to later.[14]

The core issue for public historians is how to use the specificity of photographs and oral histories to prompt consideration of broader historical issues, balancing between the nuances of lived history and a longer sweep of history seen in retrospect. Methodologically, oral historians are increasingly grappling with the ideas of mixing photographs and interviews. But mostly the discussion centers on using photographs as memory aids during the interview process itself, usually in the context of eliciting further information. A recent example from a government printing office in Australia saw institutional photographs deployed successfully to trigger particular memories about work and workplace technology for further insight. Other examples of projects that publicly present photos with oral histories (many of them based in issues of deindustrialization and/or Pittsburgh-centered) have a more calibrated relationship between image and interview. For example, the book *Portraits in Steel* tightly integrates the two by using the same person as photographic and interview subject to provide "a direct interpretative experience." Another example from Greater Pittsburgh, the 1994 volume *Envisioning Homestead*, encouraged interviewees to use their own family photos to spur reflections as the oral history proceeded, a tactic now critically engaged with by a number of oral historians.[15]

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Memory," *History and Theory* 48, no. 4, (December 2009): quotations on 114–15, 119; Mark Speltz, *North of Dixie: Civil Rights Photography Beyond the South* (New York: Getty Publishing, 2016); Martin Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011) and *Freedom Now!: Forgotten Photographs of the Civil Rights Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Leigh Raiford, "Come Let Us Build a New World Together: SNCC and Photography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (December 2007): 1129–57; Lonnie Bunch, "Embracing Ambiguity: The Challenge of Interpreting African American History in Museums," *Museums & Social Issues* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 45–56.

14 Bill Schwarz, "'Our Unadmitted Sorrow': The Rhetorics of Civil Rights Photography," *History Workshop Journal* 72, no. 1 (October 2011): 138–55. See also Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

15 Jesse Adams Stein, "'That Was a Posed Photo': Reflections on the Process of Combining Oral Histories with Institutional Photographs," *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 35 (2013): 49–57; Milton Rogovin and Michael Frisch, *Portraits in Steel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993);

By contrast, a current ongoing major international project, "Molten Light: The Intertwined History of Steel and Photography," documenting the processes of industrialization and deindustrialization, deliberately emphasizes the contrast between an insider view of workers' experiences with the outsider view of photographers. The curators describe how the addition of an oral history to an image can "provide context, both original and contemporary. Words help direct how the public interacts with and understands an image. Thus, the project uses words to help create context and extend meaning." The idea is that by conjoining the two, the particular pairings can "tell universal stories—stories about multiple mills across time and across geography," among other issues.[16]

The curious relationship between photographs and oral histories is also the extended focus of a volume co-edited by Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson. The essays within stress how both photographs and oral histories are similarly used: they can each stimulate memories and audience responses by being perceived as documents of social history. But they stress that "images need stories to create meaning." Neither are so-called containers of facts; instead both can produce multiple readings and analyses. When paired together, these essays argue in various ways that images and oral histories can legitimize one another, alter narratives, distill social realities in accessible ways, and "can bridge temporal divides" between event and meaning, or myth and reality. Yet one essay in this collection, by Al Bersch and Leslie Grant, highlights two dangers: 1) that, by personifying these issues with image and narrative, there is a danger in assisting a "deflection from systemic oppression" and 2) that, regardless of how sophisticated or nuanced the exhibition materials are, they are usually distilled into a "singular fixed" narrative, often justifying the authority of a first-person narrator. This analysis was informed by their Domino Sugar plant project where the curators deliberately mixed authors, items, points of view, and more for a deliberately contradictory cluster of stories and beliefs.[17]

Essentially, the collective literature underscores the messy but powerful interpretative possibilities lingering in "the gap in meaning" where a photograph and an oral history coexist together. I speak here of still images, although others have written convincing cases for moving images (particularly in recording the oral histories).[18] My own perspective is that the contrast of still image with oral history is more

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Judith Modell and Charlee Brodsky, *A Town Without Steel: Envisioning Homestead* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998); Judith Modell and Charlee Brodsky, "Envisioning Homestead: Using Photographs in Interviewing," in *Interactive Oral History Interviewing,* ed. Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1994), 141–61.

16 Howard Bossen and Eric Freedman, "'Molten Light: The Intertwined History of Steel and Photography'—The Roles of Oral Histories and Other First-Person Accounts," *The Oral History Review* 39, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2012): 3.

17 Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson, eds., *Oral History and Photography (*New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3; Al Bersch and Leslie Grant, "From Witness to Participant: Making Subversive Documentary," 187–202. See also Grace Elizabeth Hale, "Signs of Return: Photography as History in the U.S. South," *Southern Cultures* 25, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 12–41.

18 Freund and Thomson, *Oral History and Photography*, 14. Stein calls this a "productive slippage" and that "It is precisely because these sources do not match up neatly that makes the stories

effective because the former is fixed in time whereas the latter is time-sensitive (in the sense of both the interview's narrative and its relationship with memory). But one could conceive of a dialogue being constructed between movie images and oral histories, both on a loop, to complicate audience understandings of the evolving relationships in narrating the past in the present.

Regardless, there is an inherent tension, whether creative or otherwise, between the photographs (a constructed capturing of a particular moment in time, read by viewers in a different time) and oral histories (a constructed retelling of the past, but one informed by the present at the time of the interview plus the give-and-take of the interview itself.) Both transport the viewer/listener through time, and both have a relationship with lapses in time, although this is more obvious when the oral histories range between specific memory and interpretive reflection. These issues highlight the sensitivity required to analyze what photographs and oral histories can and cannot tell us, but also how their subjectivity should be incorporated into the exhibition itself. Combining the two, however, brings new potential in presenting layered interpretations. The oral histories add an interpretative gloss where reflective memories are pinned by a relatively static image. Each gestures to the imperfect subjectivities of the other, interpretatively speaking, as each has a different relationship to historic time, and pairing them permits that relationship to be on display to the viewer/listener absorbing the content. The interplay between the two can suggest multiple perspectives and indeed differing ones, even if they are collectively subsumed by an overarching discussion of how each item was selected, arranged, and presented in order to evoke broader meanings.

These requirements, for the purposes of my exhibition, seemingly necessitated an implicit or explicit guiding narrator or narrative, some sort of connective tissue, in order to tie these dimensions together. The very assertion clashed with the Domino Sugar project mentioned above, by emphasizing the authority of the designer over the exhibition narrative. But my desire to treat Pittsburgh as a microcosm of Black struggle was rather secondary to wanting to deploy that microcosm specifically to contest the so-called master narrative about civil rights. Consciously or unconsciously, that choice shaped my subsequent decisions.

## Designing the Exhibition

In putting these considerations into practice, the chief dilemma was allowing the "play" between multiple materials with multiple interpretative possibilities to animate the exhibition while still maintaining an overall focus. Certain challenges thus arose that dictated the eventual structure of the exhibition. First, I was conscious of different audiences in Pittsburgh and Newcastle and their relative understandings of Pittsburgh's history and context. Hence some simple framing panels to organize

and the images so compelling." Stein, "That was a posed photo," 55. Dan Sipe, "The Future of Oral History and Moving Images," *Oral History Review* 19, no. 1/2 (Spring-Autumn 1991): 75–87.

the content and provide background, especially on Teenie Harris, were necessary. The exhibition was staged on three adjoining walls in a large gallery white space, with each photo accompanied by earcups playing the paired recording on a loop. A separate section, focused on the aftermath of MLK's assassination, was set off in a separate mini-display in the round to utilize the room more effectively. Transcripts were also available, for convenience and for patrons with particular accessibility requirements. Explanatory panels broke up the different sub-themes and gave introductory overviews for the viewer. The fourth wall contained a short video, an original creation for this show, introducing Teenie Harris to our audience.[19]

Another issue was that only approximately 15 percent of RAP's interviews had been transcribed by the time the exhibition materials had to be finalized, in contrast to the 80,000-plus Teenie Harris images available for selection. This required some narrators to be used more than once, which I tried to counteract by using those interviews to comment on very different issues. Thirdly, a key interpretative dilemma was that the exhibition was sponsored as part of Newcastle's commemoration of Martin Luther King. Yet Pittsburgh lacked a direct historic link to MLK's career, even if he was treated with high regard on the few occasions he visited. More to the point, I was compelled to reflect current emphases in civil rights historiography, which treats King with considered respect but prefers not to overly enshrine him as the sole leader of the civil rights movement. Despite the event, I wanted to deemphasize him and suggest instead more multifaceted grassroots dimensions, in ideas and activities, to the modern Black freedom struggle. The result was what many public historians acknowledge is often the case: negotiating where an exhibition must position itself in between different audiences, messages, and logistical considerations. In that sense, the exhibition embodied James Young's notion of "collected memories" in which the goal is to goad reflection, rather than push a particular interpretation—and indeed it often embraced contradictory notions in order to underline that core goal.[20]

In short, I imposed a loose framework suggesting alternative aspects of the civil rights movement as a means to bind together the pairing of images and oral histories. The unspoken principle organizing this content was the desire to undermine the "master narrative," in any number of small or broad ways, as conveyed by the multiple meanings of the source material. Specific materials (both the oral histories and photos, or the two in tandem) were chosen usually on the basis of challenging dominant clichés of that false understanding. The result used the particulars of Pittsburgh to cast light on a bigger context and picture about how different forms of discrimination operated to shape Black experiences today. Structurally, this loose unity of message permitted the richest combination of varied testimonies from the oral histories matched with Teenie's own consistent gaze.

19 This description applies to the Newcastle staging; see footnote 6.

20 David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory," *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 14.

Whether poking holes in the master narrative without replacing it with another coherent narrative was sufficient is an open question. But that worry was alleviated by the fact that this was Black Pittsburgh's story specifically; if not wholly representative of other Black urban experiences, it certainly was at least analogous. In that way, introducing the contours and shape of nonsouthern racism to our UK audience registered differently, but hopefully equally powerfully, as with the Pittsburgh audience.

Although I mentally conceived of the exhibition narrative chronologically, the physical layout meant that the exhibition did not need to be viewed in that way. Instead, the photo-interview pairings were clustered into six sub-themes that likewise deliberately conversed or contrasted with each other to provide an internal narrative shape to the exhibition:

—personal prejudice (anecdotes of racism)

—personal resourcefulness and resistance (memories of individual responses to segregation)

—collective resegregation (how the forces of the state reshaped the racial contours of the city, with a special emphasis on urban renewal and the Hill District)

—versions of activism (how collectively African Americans responded in diverse ways)

—memories of Martin Luther King (with special focus on his assassination and the subsequent riots which devastated the city, as happened in most US cities)

—ongoing struggles (how African Americans interpreted their legacy of struggle then and now)

These subthemes were inspired by King's speech in Newcastle in which he commented on the relationship between racial customs and racial laws and how both can uphold or counteract segregation. His language stressed to his listeners how systemic racism perpetuates itself not only through individuals but also through structures. Highlighting those distinctions in the exhibition, however, made it important to note the diversity of African American challenges to those various forms of racism. In this way, there was at least some balanced focus between individuals and society, plus between those that created racism and fought against it. In doing so, the exhibition tried to defer to the personal dimensions and emotional content embodied by the oral histories and photographs without sacrificing the broader import of the history behind it.

After reducing the preferred photographs and oral histories to a more manageable pool of options, I had to pair images and recordings, often thematically deployed in different ways. Of course, that deployment may have registered

differently with different viewers, but I will sketch out my thinking in what follows. Many times a common element either connected a pairing or "echoed" other photographs. For example, an image of the construction work bulldozing the Hill District, with African American children contemplating it from a distance, followed a triumphant photo-op of city officials standing next to a derelict house marked for destruction. These were meant to represent some of the ways in which individuals witnessed or were implicated in broader changes with powerful racial consequences. It spoke to scale: how historical changes are lived in the moment and remembered over time, and thus part of a broader story. But it also gestured to the emotions of the event, as the celebratory men contrast with the boys, who, with backs to camera, are rendered as observing bystanders. Similarly, the oral histories with these photos discussed the Hill District's history in particular terms: how the class differences were encoded in the natural topography and how urban renewal changed the dynamics of the neighborhood. The range of perspectives treated personal, emotional, social, racial, and urban issues all at once.

Other repeating elements purposefully used images of images—selected photographs of signage—to evoke deeper layers. One arresting visual depicted a Republican campaign billboard crudely evoking crime and threats to a little girl as a reason to vote for the GOP—an almost necessary addition given the rhetoric during the 2016 US presidential election. Another showed a billboard erected in the Hill District by a civil rights group announcing their willingness to actively fight against further urban development unless adequate attention was paid to low-income housing. Using an image of an image highlighted how a further story and struggle remains outside the frame of the viewer's gaze.

A different grouping matched pictures of urban graffiti with corresponding oral history narratives. In one case, spray-painted racial slurs on various walls are explained by the narrator, Sala Udin. He says, in effect, that the tensions inherent in the city's race relations are magnified precisely because of the intensely spatial separation of the races. That explanation provided a backstory, rooted in broader urban dynamics, to the static image. Similarly, another image of a spray-painted warning against drug dealers in the Black community is matched with Udin's memories about how local civil rights initiatives physically restrained drug-dealing and tried to politicize drug addicts. In this case, his narrative explains some of the story behind the photographic depiction, while elaborating on a range of activist efforts embraced by the civil rights movement but lost in popular understanding. The combination also underscored how the raw emotion hinted at by the graffiti image was channeled into purposeful action by activists. Sometimes the pairing was less obvious, however: a joyful picture of mom and baby was contrasted with an activist reflecting on how her mom, formerly a teacher in the South but a domestic when first working in Pittsburgh, had an educational effect on local children after she opened a nursery. The implication is that activism and work could be intertwined and could take forms beyond usual notions of picketing and sit-ins.


Charles "Teenie" Harris, "Republican campaign billboard with slogan 'Make Our Homes and Streets Safe! Vote Republican' possibly on Morgan Street, Hill District, October 1949." (Courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

In one case, the interview gave a more rounded understanding of a photo both visually and historically. Alongside a somewhat sterile picture of Kennywood amusement park, the accompanying narrative described the battle to integrate that institution, which culminated in the closing of a swimming pool to thwart interracial mixing. That story helps the viewer understand the fence which prominently blights the photo. By conspicuously forming a barrier between the viewer and the park, the fence visually contributes to the scene's drabness, embodying a sense of division and the distancing that the oral history also mourns. Here, the aesthetic, the emotional, and the historical are intertwined. In other examples, the photo took on fuller meaning only with the relevant caption: the viewer, seeing a upper/middle-class African-American family reading stories, is jolted with the realization that the book is the racist "Little Black Sambo" volume; this was paired with civil rights activist Alma Speed Fox commenting on the mixed class and economic legacies of the civil rights movement, plus the class consciousness still prevalent in Black and white Pittsburgh more broadly. In still other pairings, the common element was deliberately meant to be held in tension: the cheery community festival scene featuring a booth sponsored by Oswald & Hess meatpacking company, for example, was linked with a woman's memory of being denied employment by the same company because of her race. The disjuncture between the two


Charles "Teenie" Harris, "Two boys standing next to brick wall spray painted with 'Stop Dope the pusher is our ENEMY,' c. 1960-1975" (Courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

suggests how associations and memories of Pittsburgh's history can be remembered quite differently by African Americans than by whites, particularly concerning issues of work and equal employment—another form of alternative history.[21]

In a couple places, the exhibition text carefully disputed dimensions of some memories. One example was when a narrator identifies the civil rights movement as originating with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (1954). Another denotes that local popular memory understands the decline of the Hill District as being synonymous with and caused by the 1968 MLK assassinations riots, when, in fact, the urban planning had a slower but more pernicious effect. (This corrective interpretation was given further authority elsewhere by an oral history testifying to the same.) In that sense, any sort of memorializing or nostalgia about the Hill was set off in time, disentangled from the shock events of the riot and linked instead to the larger-scale renewal of the neighborhood, which in turn highlights how the movement's structure was altered by political decisions in the world beyond activism. Indeed, the cluster of materials on the riots was an atypical way of connecting the exhibition with Martin Luther King as the occasion required, but from a vantage

21 A similar dynamic is shown in Rina Benmayor, "Contested Memories of Place: Representations of Salinas' Chinatown," *Oral History Review* 37, no. 3 (Summer/Fall 2010): 225–34.

Charles "Teenie" Harris, "Children listening to man playing small piano on sidewalk in front of Terrace Village housing project, Hill District, c. 1956." (Courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

that signaled how civil rights issues continued to reverberate even after his murder. The same point was amplified by later specific components of the exhibition, ones deliberately chosen to more fully portray a range of African American attitudes and beliefs. These additions spoke to Black Power and the African diaspora's global connections, both of which animate much of the current historical literature.

The final selections included oral histories with more generalizing language and a particular emphasis on understanding racial struggle as an ongoing, unfinished endeavor—particularly but not exclusively in the era of Black Lives Matter. Perhaps most important was Vernell Lillie's poignant lament that embodied key themes simultaneously: the silenced history of her ancestors, the shocking voraciousness of whites confiscating Black wealth for white purposes, the cultural connections that bind the Black diaspora together, and the inadequacies of scholarship. Her answer, when asked about why she founded her theatre company and for what purpose:

> And, in another sense, I'm looking at the images that I knew as a child: my father, my mother, the teachers that I experienced, the students that I experienced. They're not captured in literature, and historians have done

> a lousy job of capturing them. Nobody's done my grandfather's story. I have not seen the oil well name written, but I was told that two of those oil wells still carry my grandfather's name, Robert Jackson, and that somebody could take property like that without any problems . . . whose land was taken, and the oil wells, and the cotton, and the cotton gin that was taken from him. I also want to make sure that . . . the ride from Africa here was not that long, and there's no way possible that that jargon we say about they couldn't talk and communicate, therefore we lost. . . . We have not lost any of that culture.

The meanings embedded in this testimony constitute a powerful underlining about what this exhibition could and could not represent. What was shown by "the images of images"—the idea that much of the story remains beyond the moment of the picture—is reiterated by her narrative, which also highlights her work fighting against that reality. Paired with Fred Logan's insights about African American history as an ongoing struggle, the point was to resist putting a period at the end but rather to leave the exhibition as still in dynamic flux, an open question, where Black struggle is both a present and a historical initiative, constantly reinvented. This open-ended quality was meant to underscore the accumulated weight of the different voices and images throughout the exhibition and convey a scale of African American experiences and activism: personified by individuals yet speaking to wider community dynamics, yet nonetheless poorly compressed into the so-called master narrative, where civil rights activism is divorced from daily life as opposed to fundamentally intertwined in action and belief.

A possible downside to the design choices was the lost chance to include some aesthetic conversations. Adding this dimension would have explicitly prevented the possibility of viewers seeing the photographs as unmediated snapshots unencumbered by context, artistic design, aesthetic choices, and what the photographer, oral historian, exhibition designer, and viewer all bring to the display. Using the oral histories precluded considering the act of taking or viewing the photos as interpretations themselves. As Leigh Raiford notes, photography sits at "the crossroads of history and memory," a relationship "certainly not uncomplicated or unvexed," and one that questions the belief that photographs should only be used "as illustrations, as evidence, as a mirror that accurately reflects the past."[22] Yet, the intention was that presenting oral history narratives, with their own relationship to history and memory, in conjunction with the photographs would challenge an unquestioning viewing of those images. In that sense, the interview excerpts guarded against Raiford's warning that "photography can relieve us of the burden of memory: rather than initiating a critical process, photography can do the work for us."[23] By employing the voice of an individual recalling historical events, the prod for the exhibition-goer to engage with the content is enhanced, a different version of the intertextuality that Raiford describes in visual terms. Also, in adding

22 Raiford, "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory," 119.
23 Raiford, "Photography and the Practices of Critical Black Memory," 124.


Charles "Teenie" Harris, "Crowd, including Greta Richardson fourth from right, holding signs inscribed 'Andy Jackson need not have died' and 'Detour, Speedway closed for lack of lights and police protection,' on Webster Avenue near Morgan Street, Hill District, August 1951." (Courtesy of Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

a literal cacophony of different voices, it suggests an accumulated weight of evidence and experience that underlines the credibility of the exhibition. The diversity of stories deepens the sense of context that Schwarz suggested might be lost by focusing only on photographs, where the "racial struggle may be appear to be absent, or offstage."[24] The different senses of time imparted by photographic snapshots and reflective memory in combination together also can guard against a filter of unhelpful nostalgia potentially distorting meanings.

The nature of this exhibition and the context of Freedom City 2017 also created opportunities to deploy outreach beyond the museum. We partnered with a digital content company to create an app that featured the entire exhibition and permitted viewers to take their own photos in response to the show's themes before sharing and/or uploading them. We also worked with local schools serving students with social or learning disabilities, plus women from the Angelou Centre, a support

24 Schwarz, "Rhetoric of Civil Rights Photography," 152.

house for low-income British minority ethnic women in Newcastle, in an attempt to connect historic themes with understandings of segregation today. An additional talk-back session in Pittsburgh discussed our exhibition with many of the interviewees to continue dialogue: both in the form of further reflection from them as they heard their memories being reframed and disseminated, but also for us as an interpretative check to make sure we were doing justice to the history at stake. Collectively these events powerfully demonstrated how patrons interacted with these sources. They often responded to them on their own terms and against the framework of their own lives, and more directly connected to the emotional content of the exhibition than to the intellectual. Rather than my research "informing" the public in a one-way trajectory, the process of information exchange and shared authority (between myself as curator and the audience responding to it) continued anew. It was a powerful reminder of how oral history can be a pathway for public history.

## Conclusion

My exhibition self-consciously deployed visual and oral narratives thematically to push back against a dominant master narrative that overly governs the public memory of the modern Black freedom struggle. Although the exhibition was nominally about Pittsburgh as a place, it was equally a case study meant to complicate popular understandings about how one community experienced racism in myriad forms and discussed it in their own terms. David Glassberg's classic call remains valid, exhorting for more work rooted in local places that accentuates "what ordinarily cannot be seen: both the memories attached to places and the larger social and economic processes that shaped how the places were made."[25] In this sense, the dialogic narrative process of the interview itself was repurposed into a new counternarrative, grounded by the photographic images but collectively portraying a community making sense of wide-scale changes in their collective lives.[26] The oral history excerpts were meant to tell universal stories rather than be an immersive look at individual personalities. Although the creation of a new counternarrative tends to mute the interpretative possibilities of each individual on their own terms, the broader purpose was to reorient to wider mentalities and realities derived from living in a segregated society. In this case, the sense of a shared experience is undercut by the exhibition underscoring how the forces of urban renewal created different pockets of Black communities throughout the city. Although united by having to face racism in all of its myriad forms, there are very few things tying Black Pittsburghers together otherwise, as class, economics, migration patterns, neighborhood identification, work, and more operate in multiple

25 David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory," 21.

26 Martha Rose Beard, "Re-thinking Oral History—A Study of Narrative Performance," *Rethinking History* 21, no. 4 (June 2017): 529–48.

cross-cutting ways that complicate their identity beyond race but is rarely captured in the literature on deindustrialization.

Still, in those broader stories much individuality remains. As one Pittsburgher wrote after seeing the show: "There was a vibrancy that Teenie Harris captured that others did not. The voices make everything more real." The exhibition tried to self-consciously trigger a wider range of emotions through the photos and oral histories, from outrage to pleasure and sadness to resoluteness, underscoring that a common conversance with segregation might stifle aspirations but never joy. If the photographs remind us that African Americans had a place in the history of deindustrializing cities, the oral narratives suggest that perhaps this history of Black communities during deindustrialization highlights the core themes of decay, rebirth, and continuing resistance ever more sharply than before. As Shelly Trower has written, "attention to place-specific, personalized narratives can be used to productively disturb meta-narratives with alternative strands of knowledge." The stories were from individuals; the lessons are not.[27] With the balance of photos and personal narratives, the hope was that this exhibition might be a visceral living history that informs the present rather than be something consigned to the past.[28]

Although not quite as explicit, the exhibition also serves as a rejoinder not only to the "master narrative" of the civil rights movement, but to the literature on deindustrialization as a whole, by emphasizing the social effects of loss inextricably bound up in processes of deindustrialization and renewal. It was common for African Americans to sarcastically call urban renewal "Negro removal" instead, flipping the script to understand the toll of economic change and to highlight that renewal for whites came at a cost for others. Instead of specific factories closed and plant jobs left, the process of deindustrialization led to wholesale reshaping of cities and reallocations of resources that benefitted some at the cost of others. There is no renewal without destruction, no growth without decay, and the dimensions of the Black experience in Pittsburgh stress that. Although the story of the Hill District, when set against the literature of deindustrialization, suggests a silence about Black experiences of the shift to postindustrial worlds, the applicability of its story in terms of urban renewal holds true for most American cities. Reconciling those literatures with those of the ebb and flow of civil rights activism remains a necessity for scholars to fully grasp the scale of changes wrought and experienced by everyday people as the twentieth century drew to a close.

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27 Trower, *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History*, 3.

28 Herstad, "Reclaiming Detroit," 113; Anna Green, "Report from Abroad: Returning History to the Community: Oral History in a Museum Setting," *Oral History Review* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 53–72.

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